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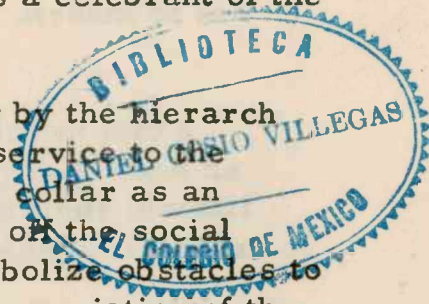
THE CHURCH, CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT

--Monsignor Ivan Illich

I will state my thesis:

Only the Church can "reveal" to us the full meaning of development. To live up to this task, the Church must recognize that she is growing powerless to orient or produce development. The less efficient she is as a power the more effective she can be as a celebrant of the mystery.

This statement, if understood, is resented equally by the hierarch who wants to justify collections by increasing his service to the poor, and by the rebel-priest who wants to use his collar as an attractive banner in agitation. Both make a living off the social service the Church renders. In my mind both symbolize obstacles to the specific function of the Church: which is the annunciation of the Gospel.



This specific function of the Church must be a contribution to development which could not be made by any other institution. I believe that this contribution is faith in Christ. Applied to development faith in Christ means: the revelation that the development of humanity tends towards the realization of the kingdom, which is Christ already present in the Church. The Church interprets to modern man development as a growth into Christ. She introduces him to the contemplation of this mystery in prayer and to its celebration in her liturgy.

I believe that the specific task of the Church in the modern world is the christian celebration of the experience of change. In order to fulfill this task the Church will have to renounce progressively the "power to do good" she now has, and see this power pass into the hands of a new type of institution: the voluntary and ever controversial embodiments of secular religion.

Later, I will explain what I mean by the progressive renunciation of power and the growth of secular religion. Now I will explain what I mean by the celebration of change.

We have ceased to live against a rigid framework. All-enveloping, penetrating change is the fundamental experience of our age, which comes as a shock to those brought up for a different age.

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In the past the same experience was exceptional and had many appearances: exile... migration... imprisonment... overseas assignment... education... hospitalization. All these traditionally represent the sudden loss of the environment which had given form to a man's feelings and concepts. This experience of change is now faced as a life-long process by every individual in technological society.

In Cuernavaca we have set up a center at which we train persons to feel with others what change means to their heart. What happens to the intimacy of a person when his familiar surroundings suddenly disappear, and with them the symbols he reveres? What happens when the words into which he was taught to pour the stream of his life lose their accustomed meaning?

What happens to the feelings of a mountain Indian thrown into a factory? What anguish does the Chicago missionary feel when he is suddenly exposed to the mountains of Bolivia, and finds himself used as a cover-up for Napalm-bombs? What happens to the heart of a nun who leaves the convent?

These questions are precise and elusive: each must be fitted to the one heart it opens.

What threat and what challenge does social change represent to this individual or to that social group? How does this heart or that common mood react to a change in setting? We speak about threat and about challenge, because the reaction to transition is very ambiguous. It can allow for new insights, can open new perspectives and therefore face the person with new awareness of choice. In other words: development can be a setting for salvation which leads to resurrection. But also, transition can reduce a bewildered individual into a defensive self-centeredness, into dependence and aggression; it can lead into the agony of a lived destruction of life; straight into hell.

Neither efficiency, nor comfort nor affluence are criteria for the quality of change. Only the reaction of the human heart to change indicates the objective value of that change. All other measures of change which disregard the response of the human heart are either evil or naive. Development is not judged against a rule but against an experience. And this experience is not available through the study of tables but through the celebration of shared experience: dialogue, controversy, play, poetry; in short: self-realization in creative leisure.

The Church teaches us to discover the transcendental meaning of this experience of life. She teaches us in liturgical celebration to recognize the presence of Christ in the growing mutual relatedness

which results from the complexity and specialization of development. And she reveals to us the personal responsibility for our sins: our growing dependence, solitude, and cravings which result from our self-alienation in things and systems and heroes. She challenges us to deeper poverty instead of security in achievements; personalization of love (chastity) instead of depersonalization by idolatry; faith in the other rather than prediction.

Thus the Church does not orient change, or teach how to react to it. It opens a new dimension of specific faith to an ecumenical experience of transcendent humanism. All men experience - the christian knows what it means.

What the Church contributes through evangelization is like the laughter in the joke. Two hear the same story - but one gets the point. It is like the rhythm in the phrase which only the poet catches.

The new era of constant development must now only be enjoyed, it must be brought about. What is the task of the Church in the gestation of the new world?

The Church can accelerate time by celebrating its advent - but only by abstaining from engineering its shape.

The future has already broken into the present. We each live in many times. The present of one is the past of another, and the future of yet another. We are called to live knowing that the future exists, and that it is shared, when it is celebrated. The change which has to be brought about can only be lived. We cannot plan our way to humanity. Each one of us and each of the groups with which we live and work must become a model of the era we desire to create. The many models which will develop should give to each one of us an environment in which we can celebrate our creative response to change with others who need us,

Let the Church be courageous enough to lead us in the celebration by highlighting its depth. Let the Church discern the spirit of God wherever charismatic gifts call the future into the present and thus create a model to live.

Let the Church be mater et magistra of this play - accentuate its beauty-let her teach us to live change because it is meaningful, and not just produce it, because it is useful.

Awareness of change heightens the sense of personal responsibility to share its benefits. Awareness of change therefore does not only lead to a call to celebration but also to a call to work; to the elimination of obstacles which make it impossible for others to free themselves for toil and illusion.

Social change always implies a change of social structure, a change of formalized values and finally a change of social character. These three factors constrain invention and creativity, and action against these constraints becomes a responsibility of those who experience them as shackles. Hence, social change involves a triple reaction:

1. The reorganization of social structure, which is felt as subversion or revolution.
2. The attempt to get beyond public illusions which justify structures, which implies the ridicule of ideologies and is felt as ungodliness or as education.
3. The emergence of a new "social type", which is experienced by many as utter confusion.

Through history the Church has participated constantly in the shaping of social change: either as a force of conservation or as a force of social promotion. She has blessed governments and condemned them. She has justified systems and declared them as unholy. She has recommended thrift and bourgeois values and exsacrated them.

We believe that now the moment has come for the Church to withdraw from specific social initiative - taken in the name of church structure. Let us follow the example of the Pope: have the courage to allow churchmen to make statements so ephemeral that they could never be construed as being the Church's teaching. Who would take the international fund for a catholic dogma?

This withdrawal is very painful. The reason is precisely that the Church still has so much power - and has used this power in such socially relevant fashion in recent generations.

If the Church at present in Latin America does not use the power she has accumulated for fundamental education, labour organization, cooperative promotion, political orientation, she leaves herself open to criticism - from without, of creating a power-vacuum - and from within, in the terms "if anybody, the Church can bear having power, because she is self-critical enough to renounce its abuse!"

But if the Church uses the power-basis she has (think of education) then she perpetuates her inability to witness to that which is specific in her mission.

Societal innovation is becoming an increasingly complex process. Innovative action must be taken with increasing frequency and sophistication. This requires men who are courageous, dedicated, willing to lose their career. I believe that this innovative action will increasingly be taken by groups committed to radically humanist ideals, and not Gospel authority, and should therefore, not be taken by Churches.

The modern humanist does not need the Gospel as a norm; the christian wants to remain free to find through the Gospel a dimension of effective surprise beyond and above the humanistic reason which motivated social action.

The social-action group needs operational freedom: the freedom to let convenience or opportunism dictate and choice of priorities of objectives, tactics and even strategy. The same social goal might be intended by two two opposed groups: one choosing violence, one non-violence as a method.

Social action by necessity divides tactical opponents. If organized around deeply held, radically human, secular-religious tenents, it also acts as a powerful catalyst for new forms of secular ecumenicism: the ecumenicism of action springing from common radical conviction.

Social action organized around secular-religious (civic-religious) ideas, therefore, frees the Church from the age-old dilemma of risking its unity in the celebration of faith in favour of its service to controversial charity.

The Christian response has been deeply affected by the acceleration of time; by change, development, growth having become normal and permanence the exception. Formerly the king could be on the opposite pole of the priest, the sacred of the profane, the churchly of the secular and we could speak about the impact which one would have on the other.

We stand at the end of a century long struggle to free man from the constraint of ideologies, persuasions and religions as guiding forces in his life. A non-thematic awareness of the significance of the incarnation emerges: an ability to say one great "yes" to the experience of life.

A new polarity emerges: a day-by-day insight into the tension between the manipulation of things and the relationship to persons.

We become capable of affirming the autonomy of the ludicrous in face of the useful; of the gratuitous as opposed to the purposeful; of the spontaneous as opposed to the rationalized and planned; of creative expression made possible by inventive solution.

We will need ideological rationalizations for a long time to achieve purposefully planned inventive solutions to social problems. Let consciously secular ideology assume this task.

I want to celebrate my faith for no purpose at all.



An address delivered at the  
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